

MALAN, ROBIN (ed). *Lord Hamlet*. Cape Town: Junkets Publisher, 2010.

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Rough-hewn Foundations

Riffling the pages of *Lord Hamlet*, the closing lines of Yeats' "Second Coming" spring to mind: "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,/Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

In many ways this tiny play script represents the culmination of a number of trends in Shakespeare studies over the past decade or so and, although inspiring, its structure and content make it a kind of "rough beast", albeit a more promising one than that in the Yeats poem. As an introduction the editor recounts a number of *Hamlet* performances that he has been privileged to watch over a span of years, both abroad and in South Africa; these will, hopefully, some day, have a special archival import for the South African Shakespeare scholar who finally writes this country's history of Shakespeare performance. Malan's chronicle is followed by a "collage" of the play, put together for the purposes of classroom performance. Finally, the whole is rounded off with a number of quotations (from a surprising array of theatrical noteworthies) on Hamlet as a role.

First off, *Lord Hamlet* is a special-interest publication made for the *Hamlet* enthusiast. In South Africa it could only ever have a reasonably small readership, as 'Hamlet-fever' is not as prevalent here as it is in Europe. Having said this, the sheer folly of producing such a script at all is what makes it so worthwhile. *Lord Hamlet* is an *hommage*; an acknowledgement that literature from the past still has the power to reach into the present world and make it better, even if it is just for a handful of people, even if it is just for the editor himself. The publisher is Junkets, named in honour of John Keats, first started for the purposes of publishing Malan's novel *Rebel Angel* (2005), a fictional biography of the solipsistic Romantic poet. The nature of the publishing house gives a great deal away about the common threads that hold *Lord Hamlet* together: it is personal, intimate, Romantic and demonstrates a commitment to 'literariness'.

Although this is a South African publication, it begins with an account of British Hamlets, only hinting at *Hamlet* in the wilds of international film (and film *noir*). Malan writes:

I have also, in a small way over the years, become a bit of a collector of *Hamlets*. When I spent seven months in the United Kingdom in 1971, I think I saw 6 different productions, as well as the 1964 Russian film (translated by Boris Pasternak, directed by Grigori Kozintsev, with Innokenty Smoktunovsky as Hamlet). Three British stage *Hamlets* of that year stand out.
(Malan 11)

Malan then proceeds to list these British Hamlets, all the while allowing for a sense that there is much left untold. This entire section could have been fleshed out considerably; Kozintsev's wrought, breathtaking *Hamlet*, the very first in the inventory, is never again mentioned.

In South African Shakespeare criticism, there is no comprehensive history of Shakespeare performance, even limited to the scope of a single play (such as *Hamlet*), which would serve as a useful index to the development of colonial and post-colonial takes on Shakespeare's plays. Rohan Quince, Natasha Distiller and Martin Orkin have written and collected a number of articles on the subject, and when it comes to *Hamlet* there are of course reviews that have been published in this journal and elsewhere, but Malan's assortment of personal recollections points up the need for a dedicated South African Shakespeare performance critic. Tony Davies, when he lived in South Africa, used to fulfil this role to some degree (on the international scene at least). For instance, his writing on Shakespeare in film does not skimp on the details when describing Kozintsev's Russian *Hamlet*:

[Kozintsev] understands that one of the spatial properties of the medium of cinema is global mobility. The distinction he makes is that between unity of place and unity of aesthetic synthesis, in which the spectator is responsible for assembling not merely a spatial whole, but a metaphysical whole which relates to the significance of the action.

(Davies 20-21)

If a Russian performance can be understood, taken apart and mythologised in such a convincing manner by a South African critic, then surely a South African critic can do the same for his or her own country. Davies' analyses are sophisticated and a pleasure to read and such collections are built upon and enriched by chronicles such as Malan's. In this, *Lord Hamlet* is an historian's dream: a personal document that gives colour and depth to a particular performance as it was 'felt on the pulses' by an individual audience member.

Malan's recollection of South African *Hamlet* performances is especially important in this regard. There have been comparatively few special or memorable *Hamlet* productions in South Africa that 'say' something about *Hamlet* performance in *this* country in comparison to, for example, Indian productions. In *Cross-Cultural Performances: Differences in Women's Revisions of Shakespeare* (1999), Ania Loomba reviews a local *Hamlet* production filmed by Pankaj Butalia, entitled *When Hamlet Went to Mizoram* (1990). Filmed in the local Mizo dialect, it envisions the youth of Mizoram suddenly becoming obsessed with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In the movie, young people begin wearing black and quoting lines verbatim from the play. *Hamlet* is even regularly broadcast on the radio. It transpires that Mizoram is a dissident Indian state which wants its own independence but is unsure in how to achieve this. The youth in that area feel angry about their situation, but do not know what to do; they do not want to join the militarised youth, but still feel helpless and unable to act. The idea behind finding a similarly politically charged South African performance is that it would have a practical application for teaching *Hamlet* in post-apartheid South Africa.

As Malan himself remarks, there is no South African production of *Hamlet* that has fully utilised the topos of corrupt State Apparatuses in this regard: the parallels between Denmark and pre-1994 South Africa are far too obvious to be artistically interesting. However, Malan does make an interesting point about how a modernised South African *Hamlet* exposes the realities of (economic) oppression more effectively than a Khaki-clad Claudius. He recalls "look[ing] forward to Rajesh Gopie's *Hamlet*, directed by Janet Suzman, in 2005" (the show ran at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town and then moved on to Stratford, where Gopie was replaced by Vaeshran Arumugam as lead):

I saw a dress rehearsal, at which he [Arumugam] seemed woefully underrehearsed, though he got some quite good notices at Stratford. Pushing the "Denmark's a prison" line rather laboriously, the director required *Hamlet* to be clad for a very long stretch of the play in the khaki shirt-and-shorts and clunky boots of the apartheid-era prison system.

Happening at almost the same time, there was another *Hamlet* in Cape Town [directed by Roy Sargeant] ... Sargeant acknowledged his inspiration as being the Ethan Hawke movie; so Elsinore was transposed to a powerful corporate setting, with glass, chrome and leather furnishings, replete with laptops and cell phones and iPods ... I couldn't help feeling they'd taken the wrong *Hamlet* to Statford-upon-Avon: it should have been the Sargeant-Johnson *Hamlet* [with David Johnson in the title role] – that was the really interesting one, and the one that really spoke of topical and current South Africa.

(17-19)

In no other work to date have performances of *Hamlet* in South Africa been so widely and variously dealt with. If Malan could have written more on the subject, taken more notes and made more insights into each performance this would have an immensely profitable contribution to South African scholarship. Even in his brief accounts, the commentator's voice emerges through the text as being experienced, warm, opinionated and engaging. In short, this is a voice that causes its readers to want to hear more.

Again, Malan's ruthless economy is applied to his actual "collage" of *Hamlet*. Again, this offering is almost too brief. The professed aim is to produce a "Solo *Hamlet*", which presents a

“Hamlet crystallised, Hamlet himself, by himself, being himself, speaking himself, revealing himself, through the medium of one particular actor, guided by one particular director, with one particular compiler shadowy in the background” (24). The collage affords a sensitive and witty interpretation of *Hamlet*, with a number of nods to the critics that *Hamlet* enthusiasts will enjoy. At one point “Hamlet’s” lines run:

“Sullied” flesh?
(He grabs hold of copies of various old editions of Hamlet or The Complete Works and consults them. He eventually finds what he wants, satisfied.)
 Sullied ... sullied ... solid flesh!
 (29)

This playful reflexivity clearly indicates that the collage is meant for initiated readers (probably teachers) and, like Heiner Müller’s similarly short postmodern version of *Hamlet, Die Hamletmaschine* (1977), it provides for the possibility of a wide variety of individual interpretations of the play.

The script as a whole is rounded off by a number of quotations concerning the role of Hamlet, either gathered from exterior sources or solicited by Malan himself. This is a novel and inventive way of extending southern Africa’s (and Africa’s) involvement with Hamlet. Those whose opinions were solicited include Gus Ferguson, Sibusiso Mamba, Janice Honeyman, Juliet Jenkin, Pieter-Dirk Uys, Omphile Molusi, Brian Chikava, Anthea Thompson, Syl Cheney-Coker, Pieter Jacobs, Anthony Akerman (twice), Akin Adesoken, Karen Jeynes, Nadia Davids, Malika Ndlovu, Lyn Darnley and Fatima Dike. Of these, the snippet that best captures the personality and feel of the collection belongs to Honeyman, who describes Hamlet as

A late adolescent; emotionally taut, searching, hormonal, self-examining, going through what we’ve all experienced – only worse. Crazy by grief, loss, isolation, astute enough to weigh up, analyse, control his feelings – then act with dynamic, immediate intensity. I’d enjoy establishing a closer, more personal relationship with him! What a boykie!
 (57)

Lord Hamlet, as a whole, represents both the boisterousness of a youthful engagement with the text and the personal, affectionate and, ultimately, mature reflection on the work that Malan has developed over a number of years.

The play/collage/history/palimpsest is written with a specific aim in mind: to celebrate a great play. In achieving this aim, however, the compiler could have included so much more. As a work intended to be read (or viewed) by critics, scholars and other parties who have invested time and energy into *Hamlet*, there is a lingering sense of performance histories untold. The actual collaged play itself is of interest as it represents one of many of Malan’s collages which he describes at length in the chapter broadly titled “Notes”. What would be far more worthwhile as a project would be a longer work, one encompassing an extended performance history of *Hamlet*, specifically as it has been played either in South Africa or by South Africans. This could be rounded off by a parallel compilation of all of Malan’s collages, dated to underline their exact historical relevance. The suggestions made here should not be taken as an indictment of the short work – far from it. Instead, this is a plea that it be extended, to fall in line with the emerging historicist trend of diachrony, a project that would ideally further interest in *Hamlet* and Shakespeare performance in South Africa.

WORKS CITED

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